DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 427 373 CS 510 007

AUTHOR Latta, Susan
TITLE Multicultural Approaches to Argument: Some Practical Suggestions.
PUB DATE 1998-04-00
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Differences; Curriculum Development; Diversity (Student); Higher Education; Multicultural Education; *Rhetoric; Student Characteristics; Writing Assignments; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; Discourse Communities

ABSTRACT

It is necessary to continue efforts to adapt the composition curriculum to the diverse needs of the student population. The writing process, even if seen as recursive, varies from student to student and from situation to situation. Students must also be shown that the very conventions and forms of academic writing are culturally situated. The Euro-American tradition is only one tradition among many. Understanding different traditions allows students to better relate to those who are different and allows the teacher to be more sensitive to individual student differences. In the field of rhetoric and composition, the emphasis on social epistemic rhetorics and on an analysis of the cultural codes of race, class, gender, and sexual difference have made it clear that language and writing both reflect and critique the ideologies of communities in which they function. Diverse multicultural assignments in essay reading and writing allow students to write a story of their own, a cultural story. But a multicultural rhetoric must also engage students in an active analysis and critique of the discourse communities in which they write. (Contains 16 references.) (NKA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
S Latta
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Susan Latta
University of Detroit Mercy

ED 427 373

Multicultural Approaches to Argument: Some Practical Suggestions

I feel, perhaps, that the title of my talk may at this point be misleading. When I first heard the theme of the conference would be *Ideas Y Cuentos: Breaking with Precedent*, I was excited because the theme meshed so well with what I was exploring in the spring of '97. I was participating with twenty of my colleagues in a seminar sponsored by my college called "The Ethical Significance of Difference," a seminar with two goals: to raise our awareness of the different cultures that have shaped our students and ourselves and to envision ways that we could revise our curriculum in our respective departments to be more inclusive of the views and backgrounds of all our students.

At the end of the seminar, we shared the various ways that we have been attempting to make our classes more inclusionary, from including work and views of authors of many different social and cultural groups to rethinking our ideas of appropriate pedagogies and assessment methods. My colleagues were committed to diversity, no doubt about it. But few of them had stopped to consider what many of us in English studies already take for granted: that culture shapes the language of disciplinary discourse and in turn the way we interpret reality. Needless to say, spirited discussion ensued. When later that afternoon I sat down at the coffee shop, fueled by the earlier discussion as well as several shots of espresso, I wrote the proposal for this paper: that the ways of teaching argument that we use in Western classrooms, from classical Aristotelean appeals to Toulmin informal logic, are grounded in Western ideologies that are not shared by many other cultures.

That's still my contention today. I still believe that we need to continue our efforts to adapt our composition curriculum to the diverse needs of our student population. That means that we need to do more in our composition classes than to simply include multicultural readings. Just as those of us committed to Women's Studies realized that we

CS 510 007

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

had to rethink the ways we taught in class and assessed our students, rhetoricians need to do the same. And that includes questioning the very nature, the very structure of the discipline we have inherited. The writing process, even if we do see it as recursive, varies from student-to-student and from situation-to-situation. We also need to do more to show students that the very conventions and forms of academic writing are culturally situated.

In analyzing this situatedness, I have found that I have returned to something I had left behind some time ago--narrative. I have been experimenting with exploring the tension between the argument, the thesis-support that we have come to accept in the West, with non-Western form of "argument", forms that often look nothing like an "argument", forms that sometimes look like a story. Thus, you'll find that as my exploration of this topic has evolved over the last year, argument has become only one part of the picture.

Structure, perhaps, would be the term I would use if I were rewriting the proposal today, and critiques of the structure of Western-based rhetorics that predominate in our schools have been long-standing. The Euro-American tradition is only one tradition among the many we have in our society. Postmodernists, following Derrida, criticize Western metaphysics, which they designate as "logocentric," and which "align the origin of truth to the *logos*--to the spoken word, to the voice of reason, or to the word of God" (Leitch, 1988, p. 271). as well as the structure of such logocentric concepts which rely on the use of a center to stabilize and unify its elements.

Feminists have continued this critique of what they designate "phallogocentrism," that is, designating the Western philosophical approach as one based in masculine epistemologies. Psychologists such as Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberg, and Tarule (1986) have argued that through socialization into feminine roles, women have developed epistemological approaches to understanding reality different from those of men. My

research on women and writer's block (Latta, 1995) also shows that women who are predominately, as Belenky et. al. would classify them, subjective, are more likely to experience writer's block and writing anxiety than those who feel more comfortable with linear logic. Critics such as Cixous (1986) have taken this a step further, arguing that women should develop writing that reflects their unique experiences of the world, a *l'ecriture feminine* that writes the female body, a structure that subverts a masculinist poetics.

In addition, the increasing call for educational activities that represent the diversity of our students, the multicultural approach, has made it clear that we need to be more mindful of the home languages, traditions, and cultures of all our students.

Discussing these traditions allows students to better relate to those who are different. The defamiliarizing act of being immersed in a culture or a world view with which they have had no contact can lead to the same result. For example, Fauske (1998) notes that his use of Maori literature in his class immerses students in a literature and a world view alien to everyone in the class and this leads to their "finding their own defenses and prejudices suddenly meaningless, [and] students must realize just how much common ground they share" (p. 18).

Understanding different traditions also allows the teacher to be more sensitive to individual student differences. Thurston points out that difficulties arose in a tribally controlled college because of the inadvertent ethnocentrism of Anglo instructors. Thurston notes, "When Anglo instructors ask students to state their thesis at the beginning of an essay, they're asking students to go against their cultural conventions--and asking them to be bad storytellers" (p. 33) as storytelling is defined by the students' Navajo culture.

Looking at alternative structures allows us to challenge the dominant logocentric tradition, to move beyond the celebration of difference to use our increase understanding

of difference to engage in cultural critique. In the field of Rhetoric and Composition, the emphasis on social epistemic rhetorics (Berlin, 1992; Faigley, 1986) and on an analysis of the cultural codes of race, class, gender and sexual difference (Berlin, 1994) have made it clear that language, and writing, both reflect and critique the ideologies of communities in which they function. If these forms and structures are culturally generated, they can and do change (Bizzell 1982).

Despite the fact that discussing these alternative approaches to structure are an ideal way to acknowledge student difference and to teach the importance of the culture in shaping the conventions of its discourse community, why has so little been done with this idea?

First of all, most of the work in contrastive rhetoric has come out of ESL programs. Contrastive rhetoric can provide us with information on rhetoric of non-Western cultures, which gives us suggestions for what alternative rhetorics might look like. Kaplan (1966), one of the first scholars in contrastive rhetoric, points out that these alternative forms are, indeed, changeable:

> Logic. . . which is the basis of rhetoric, is evolved out of a culture; it is not a universal. Rhetoric, then, is not universal either, but varies from culture to culture and even from time to time within a given culture (p. 2)

It was also Kaplan (1966) who, for the first time, provided us with the often cited visual diagrams of the logical progression of argument in several cultures. Kaplan's diagrams have often been misrepresented. Mohan and Au-Young Lo (1985) have pointed out that Kaplan's description of the organizational pattern of Chinese represents a style of writing that was used only on the civil service exams and has been out of favor since the Cultural Revolution. Connor (1996) also notes that many make the assumption that all writers in a culture use the same organizational pattern in the same situations. In other words, this is similar to members of our field arguing that model we use, say, in writing up

empirical studies (introduction, literature review, discussion of the gap, etc.) is the only way we write about academic subjects. While it may be the predominate approach, it is by no means the only one, and is becoming less so with the attempts by many critics to envision alternative forms to argument. Connor (1996) also points out that often readers assume that Kaplan's diagrams are direct representation of cognitive patterns of writers. As she puts it, "[the] diagram is taken to mean that a writing pattern reflects a thinking pattern. In other words, the Chinese write in circles; therefore, they must think in circles" (p. 31).

Despite the drawbacks to Kaplan's work, Connor uses Kaplan as a foundation for a more richly descriptive account of contrastive rhetorics. Connor's book explores characteristics of Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, German, Finnish, Spanish, and Czech. This is an excellent starting point for those wanting a general introduction to the characteristics of these various rhetorics.

The second reason, then, that so little has been done in this area is because to go beyond the necessarily brief nutshells provided by Kaplan and Connor, we need access to or immersion to the culture in order to understand the nuances of the conventions of the discourse community. Unless we ourselves have been immersed in these cultures, we need to rely on the narrations of others who are from that culture or are well-versed in the culture.

I asked students to read the widely anthologized essay by Fan Shen, "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning Composition." The essay describes the author's difficulty in attempting to adjust to the conventions of American academic writing which clashed with the instruction he had been given in Communist China. The author discusses how he had to create a new identity that had the voice of an individual when he had been taught that the needs of the individual should always be subordinated to those of the group. He pointed out that he often engaged in what he

called "reverse plagiarism," stating that a famous authority had written a certain thought when he hadn't, in order to be able to say what he, the writer, really wanted to say and wasn't supposed to.

In this discussion, Fan Shen also notes that the organization of Chinese essays differ from those patterns used in American writing. He describes the *ba gua*, or eight legged essay, has its roots in Confucius, who said that a thorough examination of a topic should touch on "the conditions of the composition: how, why, and when the piece is being composed" (Shen, 1997, p. 536). He points out Chinese students are taught six topics to use as steps in writing an essay: time, place, character, event, cause, and consequence (p. 537). This approach is similar to peeling an onion, a description which recalls the spiral that Kaplan used to diagram Asian writing.

Fan Shen also gives an example of an essay he had written from an early English class, an interpretation of Wordsworth's "Prelude," that showed the influence of the *yijing* pattern. He explains:

> . . . most critics in China nowadays seem to agree on one point, that the yijing is the critical approach that separates Chinese literature and criticism from Western literature and criticism. Roughly speaking, yijing is the process of creating a pictorial environment while reading a piece of literature. . . . According to this theory, this nonverbal, pictorial process leads directly to a higher ground of beauty and morality. Almost all critics in China agree that yijing is not a process of logical thinking--it is not a process of moving from the premises of an argument to its conclusion, which is the foundation of Western criticism. According to yijing, the process of criticizing a piece of art or literary work has to involve the process of creation on the reader's part. In yijing, verbal thought and pictorial thoughts are one. Thinking is conducted largely in pictures and transcribed into words. . . . One characteristic of the yijing approach to criticism, therefore, is that it often includes

> a description of the created mental pictures on the part of the reader/critic and his/her mental attempt to bridge (unite) the literary work, the pictures, with ultimate beauty and peace. (Shen, 1997, pp. 537-538)

As you can see this is a very different approach to constructing a literary interpretation than ours.

After a discussion of the basic content of the essay, the students and I examined in more depth these approaches. We outlined on the board what we thought each of these approaches would look like in an essay. Then we tried to apply what we had learned. Since Fan Shen had provided an example of *yijing* relating to poetry and had pointed out that this was a method used for literary interpretation, I asked students to read a poem from our department's student literary journal and asked students to think about the associations that arose when they read the poem, which is a characteristic of the *yijing* approach. The poem that we discussed was entitled "Fairy to Kill the Father":

My seventh tooth rots
beneath the Mohaired Pillow.
I waited five years
for the Fairy to pay me.
Bit down hard on peppermints
and saltwater taffy.
I gave my words to God
with hopes
they'd fall out faster.

All that
Because Nada said
For every cracked seashell,

bruised arm,
and couch thrown through the window,
God would pay,
once the baby roots
were severed.

So I made the deal
and swallowed years
for the faith.

(Fields, 1997, 15)

As you can see, this is a very evocative poem, and students had a variety of responses. Since students at first were having difficulty pulling the poem together, we used their associations as a starting point for a discussion of what the poem could mean. After the discussion, for a homework assignment, I asked students to try to write an interpretation of the essay using the *yijing* approach, recalling these associations and images.

Naturally, the students had a great deal of difficulty. They had been working all semester on writing thesis driven essays using Western argumentative approaches and now found that they could not, or dared not, move away from those approaches. I gave to assignment to both our honors students and our at-risk writers. In every instance where students completed the assignment (and quite a few did not), the result was much nearer the thesis-driven essay we had been emphasizing in class than a true *yijing*.

After discussing the difficulty of trying to use approaches that belonged to a culture we didn't belong to, I asked students to consider other times when they felt they were outsiders, whether it be in language, or in other ways, and to try to understand what had happened in that situation. The prompt I gave them was:

> Think about a time when you were an outsider trying to fit in. Recall the event and attempt to understand the differences you had with the person or persons who were excluding you. What was at issue: differences in culture? Language? Socio-economic status? Gender? Race or ethnicity? Religion?

I then asked them, at this point in their lives, if they would have done anything differently to resolve the conflict or if they felt, after considering the other's point of view, if the conflict could not have been avoided. Since this was the second assignment in a unit on persuasion, I decided this might be a good time to introduce students to Rogerian rhetoric. As you know, Rogerian asks students to try to state as fairly as possible the issue, their position, the position of their opponents, an analysis of what the two groups share in common, and an proposal for resolution of the issue in a way that would benefit both in some way.

I acknowledge that in some instances Rogerian is not an appropriate approach to argument. However, as I tend to subscribe to the view of "theory as toolbox," I think it is important to provide students with a variety of rhetorical strategies so that they can choose the one that is appropriate for their particular situation. Just because certain tools have been used by oppressors doesn't mean that those same tools can't be used by the oppressed in acts of subversion.

Despite the seemingly formulaic structure of Rogerian argument, the students were very creative, especially in terms of the other person's point of view. One person chose to write the essay in which she and her father were trying to understand her exclusion by friends at school. Her parent played the devil's advocate, trying to figure out and explain the position of the other kids. Some students, such as a young woman who felt excluded on an athletic trip, felt the situation could have been resolved. Another seemed much less sure. This student described the conflict he experienced in high school when he desperately wanted to belong to a gang so that he could have the respect of several boys

he looked up to but could not bring himself to engage in the violence the boys engaged in. His essay consisted of a recreation of a dialogue between himself and a close friend who had joined the gang, in which he tried to talk the young man out of some of the activities he was planning to engage in. While my student claimed to stand firm in his belief that joining a gang was wrong, it was clear from his essay he was still trying to resolve his mixed feelings years after the fact.

The exercise with the Fan Shen essay illustrates the kind of approach that we might use when we rely on the authority of one who has been immersed in the culture. However, we can also give students the information and the opportunity to discover on their own, based on their reading and their own experiences as writers, some of these culturally specific ways of organizing our ideas.

For example, in our reader for our Basic Writing class, there appears yet another widely anthologized essay, Silko's "Language and Literature from a Laguna Pueblo Perspective." After discussing the idea of storytelling and how tribal members used stories to construct their identities both within and outside of the tribe, we moved on to a discussion of the structure of Silko's essay. She makes note that the structure of her essay, which is really a transcript of a talk, follows the storytelling pattern of her tribe and likens it to a spider web.

Following the essay in the reader is a fairly common assignment: students write a story of their own, in this particular directive, a cultural story. I follow the instructions in the textbook although my motivations and intended outcome are much different from those of the author. After students write the essays, I ask them to share the essays in a group work activity in class. I give them worksheet to complete that asks them to discuss the following questions:

How are these stories similar/different in content?

How are these stories similar/different in structure?

What cultures are these stories situated in?

What do these stories reveal about what these cultures consider to be good stories?

I then ask each group to report their findings to the class, which I write on the board to use as springboard for discussion.

By listing the cultures engaged by the stories the students had written, it became clear that what some of the students considered to be a fairly homogenized, all-American class, was not. Not only did the international in our class (from Taiwan, Korea, and Poland) choose to tell stories from their cultures, but other students found them drawing on their Native American, or Irish, or whatever ancestry to tell stories about families and wars and myths and fairy tales that have shaped their conceptions of who they are and where they come from.

It was fairly easy at that point to ask student to consider the structures of the stories and to try to describe them with a visual. Some, we decided, used the linear model, although that's not what we called it. Some followed the structure of traditional short stories, with exposition, rising action, climax and denouement. Some were like Silko's spider web and some were spirals and some were patchwork quilts. After seeing all the different ways that stories could be structured, when it cam time to discuss the criteria for a good narrative essay, we had none of the typical "it should have good grammar" and "your thesis should come in the beginning paragraph" that we often hear from our students. Instead, this class, a class that had been typified by their placement scores as needing remediation, launched into a sophisticated analysis of the interaction of culture, audience and rhetorical purpose, and this was only the fourth class session. Even more gratifying was that this understanding seemed to stick: yesterday, during our peer response to our essays about our families, one of my students, a young woman from one of our more notoriously wealthy and European suburbs, discussed with me and her writing

partner the pattern of her essay. When we started looking at how the essay was actually put together, rather than thinking what form should be imposed on it, we found that the essay was really two overlapping spirals, both beginning at the center but moving outward in different directions, a pattern inspired by the movement in her life with her interaction with her sibling. It is also a movement familiar to the Taiwanese students in our class, Kaplan's famous spiral visual representing Asian writing. My student didn't consciously choose to do an organizational pattern from another culture in her essay, but because we had discussed these approaches and talked about them as options, her range of choices as a writer had been broadened to include these alternatives that ordinarily students in classes using traditional rhetorical approaches would not be exposed to.

I think the examples of these lessons illustrate two important points I want to make about incorporating non-Western approaches to rhetoric in the class. First, such approaches do not supplant the teaching of traditional rhetoric. Students in multicultural rhetoric classes must learn the traditional approaches to argument, just as they must learn Edited American English, but at the same time we must affirm and employ other approaches to argument. Whether we believe that it is just or not, Edited American English and traditional Western approaches to argument are still considered the standard in our society. To not give students access to these tools is to do them a grave disservice and to neglect our responsibility to give them a wide and comprehensive education.

Secondly, a multicultural rhetoric must do more than provide students with a smattering of readings by authors of other cultures. It must engage students in an active analysis and critique of the discourse communities in which they write. They need to understand the situatedness and provisionality of the conventions they are taught in Academic Writing. A contrastive analysis of the structures of rhetorics of another culture can illustrate this provisionality and give them a better understanding of members of this or any other culture that they might meet in our increasingly diverse world.

Finally, excursions into another culture's rhetoric defamiliarizes our students. Trying to learn the language and cognitive patterns of another group can lead them to be more tolerant and understanding of those who differ from them in any way. Sometimes it is much easier to analyze a culture that we don't belong to, and this can serve as a stepping stone to an analysis of the cultures we do belong to.

References

Belenky, M.F., Clinchy, B.M., Goldberg, N.R., and Tarule, J.M. (1986). Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind. New York: Basic.

Berlin, J., & Vivion, M. (Eds.). (1992). Cultural studies in the English classroom. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinneman.

Bizzell, P. (1988). Cognition, convention, and certainty: What we need to know about writing. Pre/Text, 3, 213-243.

Cixous, H., & Clement, C. (1986). The newly born woman. (B. Wing, Trans.) Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Connor, U. (1996). Contrastive rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second language writing. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Faigley, L. (1986). Competing theories of process: A critique and proposal. College English, 48, 527-542.

Fauske, C. (1998). Some other culture: Maori literature as a unifying force in a multicultural classroom. Teaching English in the Two-Year College, 26(1),18-24.

Fields, C. (1997). Fairy to kill the father. In J. Dudus et al (Eds.), [SIC], (Vol. 6) (p. 15). Detroit: Greenroom Press.

Kaplan, (1966). Cultural thought patterns in multicultural education. Language Learning, 16, 1-20.

Leitch, V. B. (1986). American literary criticism from the 30s to the 80s. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lisle, B., & Mano, S. (1997). Embracing a multicultural rhetoric. In C. Severino, J.C., Guerra, & J.E. Butler (Eds.), Writing in multicultural settings (pp. 12-26). New York: Modern Language Association.

Matalene, C. (1985). Contrastive rhetoric: An American writing teacher in China. College English, 47, 789-808.

Mohan, B., & Au Young-Lo, W. (1985). Academic writing and Chinese students: Transfer and development factors. TESOL Quarterly, 19, 515-531.

Shen, F. (1997). The classroom and the wider culture. Identity as a key to learning English composition. In S. Maasik & J. Solomon (Eds.). Signs of Life in the USA (pp. 531-540). Boston: Bedford.

Silko, L. (1997). Language and literature from a Pueblo indian perspective. In G. Colombo, B. Lisle, & S. Mano (Eds.), FrameWork: Culture, Storytelling, and College Writing. (pp. 21-30). Boston: Bedford.

Thurston, M. (1998). Mitigating barriers to Navajo students' success in English courses. Teaching English in the Two-Year College, 26(1), 29-38.